

MIAMI HERALD
7 December 1986

U.S. knew Iran ordered, funded Beirut bombings, intercepts show

By JIM MCGEE
Herald Staff Writer

Two years before Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North arranged shipments of arms to Iran, the White House had precise evidence that Iran paid for the terrorist bombings in Beirut that killed 258 U.S. servicemen and diplomats.

The secret eavesdropping network of the National Security Agency intercepted diplomatic messages in 1983 showing that the government of Iran ordered and financed the Beirut bombings, according to information obtained by The Miami Herald and confirmed Friday by a White House official.

The intercepted diplomatic messages enabled U.S. officials to trace the movement of more than \$1 million from the government of Iran to the Iranian Embassy in Lebanon, where it was disbursed for the bombings of the U.S. Embassy and the Marine barracks.

The money was earmarked for the 1983 campaign of terrorist actions against U.S. targets in Lebanon, according to U.S. intelligence reports prepared after the attacks.

"Looking at it [the intercepted messages] after the fact, it was a clear indication the money was going for the attack," said an official familiar with reports based on the intercepts. "There was no doubt in our minds."

On Friday, a White House official involved in national security matters described The Herald's account of the material intercepted by the NSA as "damn good."

"Obviously, the NSA knew about this, and I would have to surmise the president knew about it, too," the White House official said. "After the bombing, [President Reagan] took a keen interest in who did it."

The new information on Iran's involvement in the bombings underscores the dramatic change in U.S. policy toward Iran that took place in June 1985 — after the Reagan administration realized that Iran had used its influence with Lebanese Shiite Moslems to free the Americans seized in the Trans World Airlines hijacking.

The NSA intercepts in 1983 were consistent with other information obtained by CIA officers investigating the embassy bombing, a source familiar with the U.S. investigation told The Herald.

Under interrogation by U.S. and Lebanese authorities, a suspect in the embassy bombing confessed to being the paymaster for the attack and told interrogators that the money he used originally came from Iran.

A third corroborating link to Iran was disclosed in 1984 with published reports that a Lebanese "fixer" involved in staging the barracks attack cashed a \$50,000 voucher at the Iranian Embassy three days after the bombing.

It is not clear how long before the attacks the communications were intercepted or why the NSA intercepts were not used to warn American personnel. One official familiar with the situation said there often are long delays in analyzing the intercept communications.

"There is so much stuff coming in all the time that it is not translated and analyzed on a real-time basis," said the official. "There is stuff on the tapes that isn't analyzed until months later."

The U.S. government has never publicly disclosed what it determined about the two bombing attacks, which led to the largest loss of American military personnel since the Vietnam War.

A month after the Marine bombing, Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger told reporters that the perpetrators were "basically Iranian with sponsorship, knowledge and authority" of Syria.

In November, The Washington Post reported that Israeli and American intelligence agencies had developed information that the Iranian government was a "chief supporter" of the terrorist groups responsible for the attacks.

Recent interviews in Washington and elsewhere, however, indicate that the information available to the Reagan administration in early 1984 showing direct involvement by the Iranian government was more precise than has previously been reported.

"It was Iranian money and Syrian expertise and direction," said one source familiar with the subsequent investigation. "The Syrians don't have money to burn. The Iranians do."

The Herald reported in August that the CIA had obtained confessions from five Syrian-backed participants in the bombing of the U.S. Embassy and established that Syrian intelligence officials supervised the attack. The confessions were subsequently confirmed by a CIA-administered polygraph test.

That account, which described the confession of the paymaster, was subsequently confirmed by the Reagan administration.

Seventeen Americans were killed in the bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut April 8, 1983.

The attack on the Marine compound at Beirut International Airport came six months later.

Early on Oct. 23, 1983, a truck carrying about 2,000 pounds of explosives wired to tanks of propane gas erupted in a blast that demolished the four-story main building and left a crater 40 feet deep and 30 feet wide.

Continued

Dozens of young Marines were killed instantly in their bunks. Many more were buried under the rubble.

It has been publicly reported that North, a career Marine reputed to have expertise in counterterrorism, was assigned to investigate the barracks bombing for the National Security Council.

One official source said it is inconceivable that North was not made aware of the NSA intercepts and other evidence implicating Iran. North has repeatedly declined to be interviewed.

After Iran cooperated in the TWA jetliner crisis, North's former boss, ex-national security adviser Robert McFarlane, argued that better relations with Iran were desirable because of its pivotal role in the Mideast.

In September 1985, North arranged to ship the first planeload of U.S. arms to Iran, according to administration officials.

There was considerable debate within the intelligence community about avenging the Beirut bombings, an official told The Herald.

A William Buckley, the former head of the CIA station in Beirut until he was kidnapped, had advocated in at least one meeting that the United States retaliate against Syria.

"It was one of his great frustrations with this," said an official. "The Syrian connection, what they did and the fact that the U.S. government didn't pay attention."